

CORONAVIRUS:

WHAT SHOULD HR BE DOING?



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In a crazy world, HR should not be crazy; we need to be much more mindful about what this means for the business and our people.

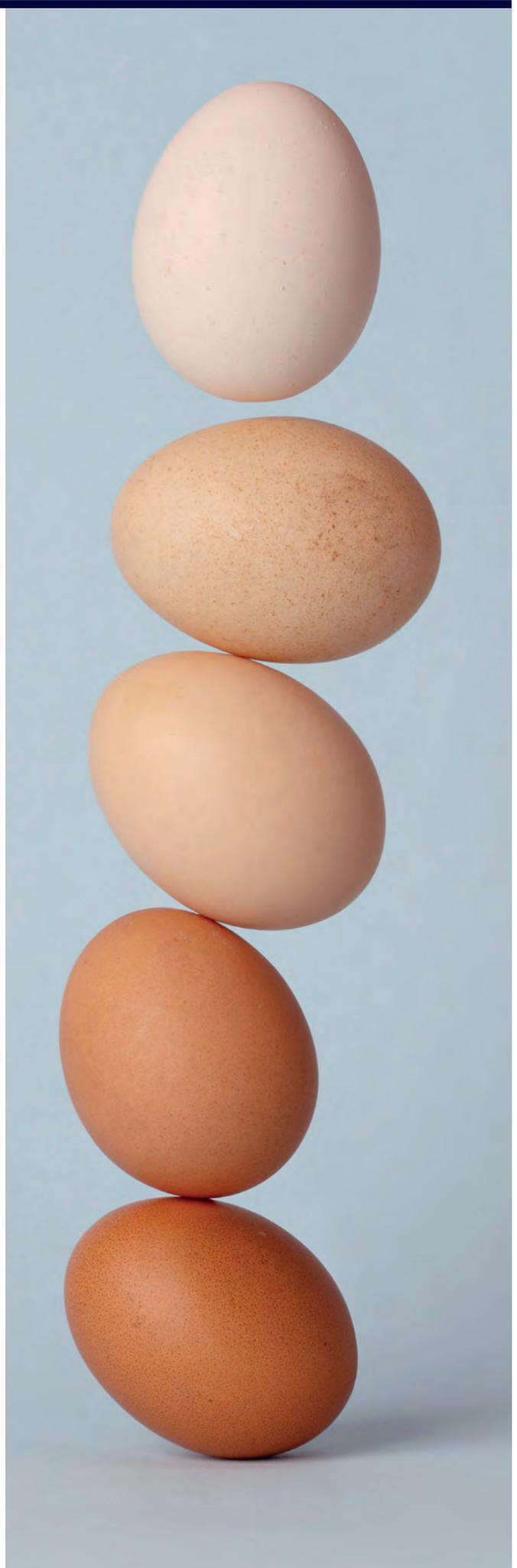
WHAT SHOULD HR BE DOING NOW?

REBALANCING

Focus on the short-term, but don't forget the long-term. There will be pressure to cut costs and HR needs to be realistic in engaging with the short-term need to stay afloat, but also have the courage to challenge the longer-term implications. Reducing head count today may save money but may lower productivity in the long-term. We need to ensure we are taking a nuanced approach. But we need to frame these conversations in metrics that the business – especially the Finance Director – will understand: Cutting R&D spend might reduce our expenditure by £x but will reduce our new product pipeline by £y.

FACT-BASED

Don't react to the press, social media and anecdotes – focus on the facts and what they mean for the specific sector and business.





PLANNING

Reflect, plan for the worst-case scenario, be proactive and follow through decisions in a disciplined way. Involve employees in thinking about what needs to change. Create online task forces, organise virtual meetings and use modern online sharing platforms. Get these task forces to scenario plan – don't ask them to come up with the answer, but ask them to develop hypotheses based on different 'what if' scenarios. We cannot predict what the outcome of the current situation will be, but we can prepare for different outcomes and be ready for them. Doing it 'with them' not 'to them' has enormous benefits. People are realists they will understand the impact of the crisis.

FOCUS

Now is not the time to focus on HR but on employees and the business, so put any HR transformation or similar projects on hold. Stop any unnecessary expenditure. Question whether centralised global HR-driven initiatives are relevant

and put them on hold. Redeploy those people into more operational HR roles and get them closer to the business (this will probably pay dividends longer term as well).

NEVER WASTE A GOOD CRISIS

In the last major recession companies took the opportunity to address underlying issues of cost effectiveness and underperformance because no one could deny the reasons why or hide.

COMMUNICATE

This will be extremely stressful for everyone; people are uncertain so communicate, communicate and then communicate some more. Much of this communication will be bad news delivered by managers who will be under pressure themselves, so how can HR support them with online learning and virtual coaching? There is a danger managers will assume people-related issues are less important when in fact they will become more important. As a member of a leadership or management team, it is critical that you coach your peers on the importance of maintaining morale, and of being visible (even if it's virtually).

CONNECT

Virtual tools allow us to continue to connect. When people are working from home they will need (even more) to connect with each other, so facilitate this. There will be pressure on connectivity and bandwidth so you might need to cover the cost of better internet or bandwidth for employees.

LEARNING

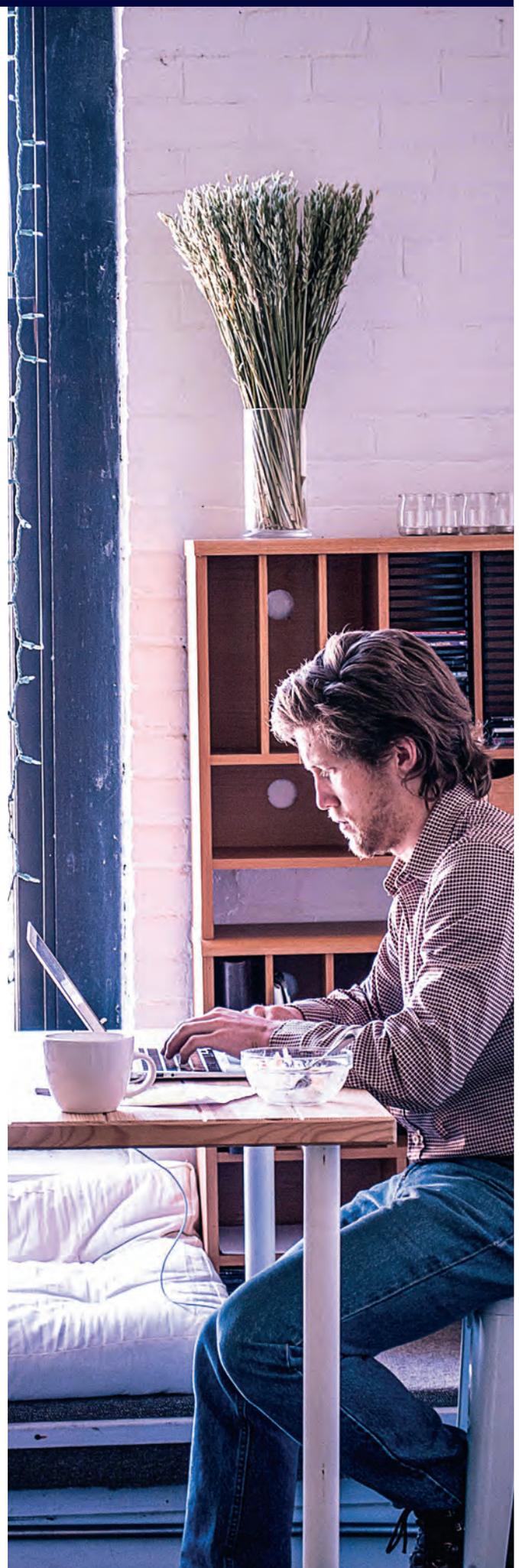
Thinking of the long-term, remember that development is still important. Look at opportunities to deliver learning online, bite-sized learning, longer webinars, and/or connecting people to available resources such as TED talks on the Internet. Connect these activities to chat rooms where your L&D team can facilitate 'so what, now what' conversations based on online learning sessions. It is not enough to cut and paste content; virtual learning can be highly engaging and interactive as TED has shown.

WORKING REMOTELY

A key challenge in this environment will be working and managing remotely. We all know that managers engage employees, so it is critical in these difficult times that we encourage them to think even more about their role as managers. It is not enough to simply write guidelines; HRBPs should be coaching managers on how to manage remotely. It is important to ensure your managers are:

- Setting clear expectations for issues like calendar sharing, response times, and so on.
- Using project management software to plan and share major projects, and checking to ensure employees understand the processes..
- Communicating with their teams, or they will likely feel abandoned. This should be scheduled regularly, thinking carefully about when and how: video becomes even more important so use Zoom, Skype or other tools that go beyond text and email. They shouldn't forget that you lose a lot of the non-verbal cues you get face-to-face, so double-checking understanding becomes even more critical.
- Holding regular one-to-ones to check in, coach and answer questions. Their questions should go beyond work, so they engage with their teams as human beings. Use these one-to-ones to check in with them and discuss longer-term issues like development and careers. Managers need to show they care.
- Setting up a virtual water cooler where people can keep in touch – not just about business issues but to remain connected socially. Work has meaning for people beyond simply earning money. It is important for people's feelings of self-worth and identity. Loneliness and isolation are major issues with remote working. Indeed, neuroscience has identified 'social interaction atrophy' – when you don't interact braincells start dying! Managers need to consider how they give people the meaning they lose from not being in the office.
- Aware of time zones. In global businesses they should be careful to schedule remote meetings that are convenient for as many as possible. Even if they have an outlier, they should look to schedule some meetings to suit them. Managers should be careful not to have or set expectations of when people should respond to emails out-of-hours, bearing in mind one's working time might be nighttime for others.

Finally, there are probably people in your organisation who already manage people remotely or work remotely, so speak to them and learn from them.



HOW SHOULD HR BE PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE?

We will come out of this, so whilst we started by saying we need to rebalance in favour of the short-term, we should also be preparing for the future.

FOCUS ON THE BUSINESS, NOT HR

Use the thinking around unnecessary expenditure to rigorously focus the function of the future on activities that drive business value rather than HR-driven solutions. Be more rigorous in testing everything against a simple question 'what is the business issue that this is the answer to?'. This short-term thinking needs to influence your long-term planning.

PRODUCTIVITY

There will be a massive productivity challenge as we move out of the crisis and try to recover financially. You should be facilitating conversations now with the line to understand which parts of the business will be most critical in answering the productivity challenge and how they will answer it. Again whilst it is important to rebalance to the short-term (you don't ask about decor in the first-class lounge after the Titanic strikes the iceberg), the crisis will end and it is the companies that are prepared and know what to do that will thrive. Make sure you deploy your best HR people in these critical areas, not necessarily in those areas they have traditionally supported. They should be contributing to these conversations, so make sure they are doing their research, not just their job.

REMOTIVATE

You will need to remotivate and re-energise your workforce and that begins with how you treat them today. Avoid knee-jerk actions unless absolutely



necessary. People have long memories. The labour market will continue to be tight once we are out of the recession. The longer-term demographic trends won't go away, so retaining your best performers and critical staff is essential. Research shows that during periods like this your highest performers and highest potentials will be looking at job boards and speaking to recruiters if they become disillusioned by short-term knee-jerk reactions. You will need them even more when the recovery comes, so get close to them and listen to their concerns. Equally, now might be an opportunity to poach critical talent from your competitors. There are things you can be preparing today to re-energise your people when we come out the other side:

- Reinforce the vision and reconnect them to the bigger picture
- Involve them in decision-making and empower them
- Communicate more often
- Reinvest in upskilling
- Recognise success
- Improve their work environment
- Help the team bond
- Develop your leaders' and managers' ability to engage.

A CULTURE OF CARE

Show you care. Make sure managers are asking how their people are, not just what they're doing. Celebrate people who are going above and beyond. Celebrate those who are connecting their colleagues and helping their communities. Continue to invest in your people. Train your managers in how to engage with them and support them in this need to balance short- and long-term. What you do now will have ramifications on how your employees view you later, so balance the short-term crisis with the long-term recovery. In the last recession the survivors never forgot how their colleagues were treated, so even if you have to lay people off or put people on reduced hours think carefully about *how* you do it. If you can demonstrate you have a culture that cares, it will pay dividends long-term.

PURPOSE

You need people to lean in and take the initiative; they often know what to do but are paralysed by uncertainty. Reinforcing the organisation's purpose is critical to keeping people connected to their roles. It is not enough to send an email repeating your purpose statement; what is important is to use purpose as part of your communication and hold conversations with people about what it means for them in the current situation and what they can do. You also need to reinforce your values. Research shows employee misconduct increases during a crisis, especially where cost-cutting is involved.

REFLECTING ON THE KEY LESSONS

REFLECT

I did some research in 2009 into the recession and it amazed me how few people had gone back to previous recessions to ask what they had learned that they might apply. Now is probably not the time to reflect, but as we begin to come out of the crisis, we should mindfully reflect on what we can learn from the past.

LEADERS

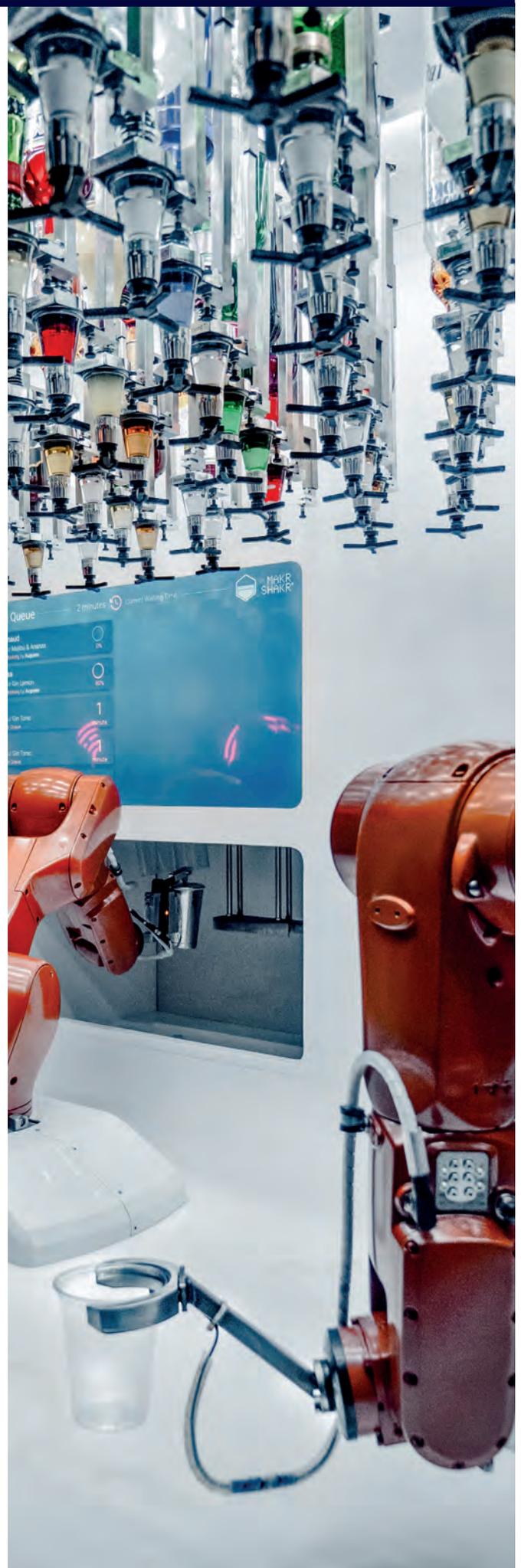
Which leaders stepped up to the plate and which disappeared?

THE NEW NORM

Will new ways of working remotely become the new norm? What will this mean for what is acceptable - suit and ties, nine to five, and so on? How can we apply the lessons - less money spent on travel, more video calls, more online learning? Not everything can be done online, but could we be more rigorous and less emotional in saving not just money but also the opportunity cost of people's time? How can we ensure our online working methods are technologically seamless, that people have access to sufficient bandwidth, and that they have been properly trained in how to use them? At a higher level this can only accelerate other trends in the world

of work such as automation, machine learning, AI and robotics – not just in brawn industries such as manufacturing and distribution but also in more brain-oriented industries. As someone said to me, HR will become Humans and Robots. We need to engage now with what this means for our business and become experts not just in people but in productivity.

We should take the opportunity to sweep away old ways of working and create a more engaged, energised and productive workforce.



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